

GRAND JUNCTION RESOURCE AREA, ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

EA Number: CO-079-7-79

Project Name: RMP Amendment for Gunnison River Bluffs Plan and Powerline Road public access.

PART I, INTRODUCTION, PROPOSED ACTION

INTRODUCTION: The Gunnison River Bluffs Plan (GRB Plan attached) was developed in 1995 to address public use of Mesa County, BLM, and private lands in the vicinity of the Mesa County Landfill and Lower Gunnison River Canyon. This plan has been adopted by Mesa County, BLM, Mesa County, Grand Junction/Mesa County Riverfront Commission, Spanish Trail Association, and other interest groups have been active in implementation of planned actions including trails, signing, brochures, fencing, developing parking lots, acquiring land and access easements, etc. The GRB area is also part of the adjacent Grand Mesa Slopes (GMS Plan attached), an 80 square mile managed "open space" adopted in 1993. The GMS area has also seen a significant amount of access, trails, signing, land acquisition, and public management projects in recent years.

As part of BLM involvement in the GRB plan BLM agreed to pursue amendment of the Grand Junction Resource Area Resource Management Plan (RMP) to close about 800 acres of scattered public lands in the area to motorized vehicle use, and to reclassify these 800 acres of BLM "disposal" lands to "retention or exchange that would benefit GRB management". The intent of retention of the scattered parcels of BLM is to insure maintenance of scenic open space and public access in the GRB area, in conjunction with adjacent Mesa County ownership and other easements.

The Powerline Road access (see map) is also part of this RMP amendment. The Powerline Road is within the GMS area and is partially within an area of the Town of Palisade Watershed that is closed to public motor vehicle use to protect municipal watershed values. The landowners and managers involved (Mesa County, Ute Water, Town of Palisade, BLM, and other private landowners) have agreed on a plan to allow seasonal motor vehicle access on this road to provide hunting access to the nearby Chalk Mountain area. Alternative access to the Chalk Mountain area was recently lost due to a change in land ownership. The BLM RMP action needed to provide this access is to reclassify the Powerline Road from "closed" to "limited use", with a seasonal restriction that provides for motor vehicle access during the Colorado big game rifle hunting seasons.

PROPOSED ACTION: The BLM RMP amendment action proposed in the GRB area is to designate about 800 acres of BLM land as "closed to motor vehicle use", and to reclassify these 800 acres of BLM land from "disposal" to "retention or exchange that would benefit GRB management".

The BLM RMP action proposed in the GMS area is to reclassify the lower Powerline Road from "closed" to "limited use", with the period of use to accommodate big game hunting during the Colorado big game rifle hunting seasons.

CONFORMANCE WITH LAND USE PLAN: The proposed actions require amendment of the RMP. The proposed actions are the outcome of broader scale land use plans (GMS, GRB) that have been developed in a public forum and have been adopted by Mesa County.

PART II, DESCRIPTION OF AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND IMPACTS

CRITICAL ELEMENTS REVIEW:

<u>Critical Element</u>	<u>Present</u>	<u>Affected</u>
Air Quality	yes	no
ACEC's	no	no
Cultural Resources	yes	yes
Farmlands, Prime/Unique	no	no
Floodplains	yes	yes
Native American Religious Concerns	no	no
Wilderness	no	no
T&E Species	yes	no
Wastes, Hazardous/Solid	no	no
Water Quality	yes	no
Wetlands, Riparian Zones	yes	yes
Wild & Scenic Rivers	no	no

DESCRIPTION OF AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT: The GRB area is 4600'-4900' in elevation, and is primarily desert shrub and grassland. There is a generally narrow riparian zone of skunkbrush, willow, and a few Cottonwood trees along the Gunnison River. The GRB Plan addresses public use and real estate actions related to a mix of BLM, Mesa County, and private lands in the vicinity of the Mesa County Landfill. A four mile section of the Old Spanish Trail Northern Branch crosses the area. The primary Mesa County interest is in landfill management with appropriate public use of surrounding buffer lands. The "disposal" category for the scattered BLM lands in GRB reflects a past land use situation where there was not a well formulated community interest in the area. Mesa County and other interests have now developed a public use and open space plan for the GRB area that recommends retention of BLM lands in public ownership.

The Powerline Road area is 5300'-6600' in elevation, and is primarily a pinyon-juniper forest with some scattered sagebrush. The lower portion of road is an historic Mesa County public road route that has not been regularly used by the public for probably 60 years. Alternative roads have been developed in the area to serve Town of Palisade and ranching needs. The upper section of the Powerline Road has essentially been used as a private road by the local rancher and Public Service Company of Colorado (to construct and service a major electric transmission line). For

purposes of hunting access the lower and upper Powerline Road is passable and would provide important public access to BLM lands in the Chalk Mountain area. The purpose of the existing closure to public motor vehicle travel is to protect Town of Palisade municipal watershed values. Most of this closure would continue, and the affect of allowing motor vehicle access on the Powerline Road should be negligible since the two road systems would be separated by fences, rocks, and natural barriers, and there would be increased patrol.

DESCRIPTION OF IMPACTS: The Old Spanish Trail in the GRB area would probably be better managed in public ownership and in conjunction with management of adjacent Mesa County and private lands. The same would probably be true for the floodplain-wetlands-and riparian zones along the Gunnison River.

Bald eagle occasionally fly over and use the GRB/GMS area. The Gunnison River is considered habitat for the four Colorado River endangered fish species: Colorado squawfish, Razorback sucker, Bonytail chub, and Humpback chub. There are some scattered *Sclerocactus glaucus*, a small barrel cactus, in the GRB area. For all of these threatened and endangered species the proposed action, in conjunction with management of adjacent lands, should prevent adverse affects on the habitat for these species.

The primary impact of the proposed action on GRB would be long term ability to manage and plan for public use and protection of natural resources in the area in a collaborative manner with Mesa County, other private landowners, and public interest groups. The surrounding Mesa County and private lands are already closed to public motor vehicle use so there is essentially no legal access to the BLM lands involved. Closure of BLM lands to motor vehicle use would create consistency with management of adjacent lands and with the GRB Plan.

The primary impact of opening the Powerline Road to public motor vehicle access during Colorado big game rifle hunting seasons would be the re-establishment of reasonable access to about 8,000 acres of BLM land in the Chalk Mountain area. There would also be some reduced business value to the hunting outfitter who recently bought private land and closed the historical public access to the Chalk Mountain area.

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PART III, CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

PERSONS/AGENCIES CONSULTED: Colorado Division of Wildlife, Mesa County, Ute Water, Powder Mountain Ranch, Lloyd Ranch, Town of Palisade, hunting interest groups, Grand Mesa Slopes Advisory Group. There were no comments on the Proposed Action BLM Federal Register Notice.

Reviewers Names, Resource/Concern, Date:

<u>Joe J. Asher</u>	<u>Recreation</u>	<u>6-25-97</u>
<u>Ross Lambert</u>	<u>Wildlife</u>	<u>6-25-97</u>
<u>David P. Stevens</u>	<u>NEPA Compliance</u>	<u>6-24-97</u>

Preparer Name, Title, Date:

<u>Colin Savage</u>	<u>Realty Specialist</u>	<u>June 20, 1997</u>
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PART IV, FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT/DECISION RECORD

I have reviewed this environmental assessment and have determined that the Proposed Action would have no significant impacts on the human environment, and an environmental statement is not required. This proposed RMP amendment reflects land use planning and decisions made in a public forum, including the Mesa County planning and approval process. It is my decision to implement the proposed action.

Catherine Poluk
Recommended: Grand Junction Resource Area Manager

6/27/97
Date

Robert Allen
Approved: BLM Colorado State Director

8-7-97
Date

Attachments:

- 1) Gunnison River Bluffs Public Use Plan
- 2) Grand Mesa Slopes Management Plan
- 3) Powerline Road map
- 4) Mesa County letter of support
- 5) BLM Federal Register Notice